

Parfleches

Background:

A parfleche is a container of folded or sewn buffalo hide, decorated on the outside with painted designs. These were made by women from more than 40 tribal groups in the western half of North America during the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries. They were used to transport a family's food and their material possessions such as clothes and tools.

The term refers to war shields that were made of heavy buffalo hide and was used to describe the untanned skin in addition to any objects constructed from that material. Eventually, parfleche became the common name for the large, folded envelope-like containers of buffalo hide.

In its finished state, the parfleche is tough, durable, waterproof, and unbreakable. The smooth hard surface is stiff when new, but can be folded without cracking and becomes more pliable with use. Buffalo hide was the preferred type of hide for making parfleches but elk, horse, moose and possibly deer hide were used as well. As soon as they became available, the hides of domestic cattle were also used.

The paint used on the parfleches was made using variety of sources. Most pigments came from minerals, but a significant number of vegetable and animal materials were used as well. Among many tribes, paint was considered to be a sacred material. The colors and pigments were believed to embody sacred powers.

The first step in making a parfleche was to scrape the inner side of the hide, removing connective tissue, fat, and flesh. This process was called "fleshing the hide". The fleshed side became the exterior surface of the finished parfleche. Next, the fleshed hide was staked 6-10" above the ground, hair side down. The hide was then washed and scraped to an even thickness, using a bone flesher.

Before the hide was completely dried, it was ready for painting and sizing. Paint was applied while the hide was still wet so it penetrated the hide to some degree. Sizing sealed the hide and made for a strong, lustrous coating. This sizing (for example, the juice from a prickly pear cactus) was applied over the paint. Once dry, the hair was removed by either pounding the hide with a heavy, smooth stone or by scraping with another bone tool.

The parfleche was then cut out and folded.

Making a Painted Parfleche

1. Using the pattern provided, have your students make a paper replica of a parfleche. They can either draw on their own geometric designs or color in the design provided on the pattern.
2. To do this, have them first color or paint the exterior of the parfleche.
3. First fold the pattern along the long, vertical dotted lines then along the short horizontal dotted lines.
4. Punch holes in the outside flaps using a hole puncher.

5. Tie the flaps together using a piece of yarn or string inserted through the holes.
6. Have your students store something special in their parfleches.